

Way back, we scheduled heifer calving to hit after the leaves fell from the mesquites. As the land became a solid thicket, we shifted to bringing the heavies to a trap to be penned every night. By opening a calving hospital, we stopped losing cows and started losing sleep.

Penning the cattle every evening and walking through the herd horseback makes for gentle animals the rest of their lives. This year's class is so sack broke and so accustomed to humans, at night I have to be careful to keep from stumbling over one. Black cattle blend well into a dark night. The cost of flashlight batteries converts so poorly to the price of steer calves that constant illumination of a big holdover pen is unaffordable. I just blink my light toward the tailhead and make fair guesses.

One Saturday night after a dance in Angelo, I checked the cows in a light rain. Missed 13 of the 21 head the first lap around the run-around. Second try missed the same amount. Gave up on the third count, as my flashlight wasn't strong enough compensate for the rain fogging on my glasses. Wet weather ruins hearing aids, so I had left them at the house. Harder rain began to fall.

The only support left was my sense of smell and my sense of touch. In the shortgrass country, the odor of wet

cow hair is as unfamiliar as privacy to a doorman. I didn't know whether wet cattle smelled like cedar bark or grape jelly. Feeling for the missing cattle in the darkness was out of the question. Doesn't take long to discover what defense measure replaces horns for a muley cow. After one work, you learn to watch the heels instead of the head. Blinded by the rain and unable to hear in the downpour, I gave up and went back to the house.

My friend called as I reached the door to see if I had made it home over the dirt road. Being a cow person in her own right, she wanted to know if my heifers were all right. Not willing to admit I'd missed about as many as I'd found, I said, "Oh, I think they'll be okay until morning."

Certainly a safe guess, considering the time was 1 a.m. and the closest I'd come to resting was resting my hand on the top board of a wet gate to steady myself in the mud.

Just at daybreak I checked to find all the heifers gone. But I did find the gate open to a trap. I couldn't read the signs in the mud. I wear a size 13-D rubber boot. I'd made so many rounds sloshing in the mud, I'd obliterated any ruts smaller than those of a dually truck tire. So no clues were left as to how the gate latch came unsnapped.

Custom reigns to blame crows and ravens, unpapered aliens, raccoons, or deer hunters. Crows and Chihuahua ravens are prime suspects for any mysterious crime, as those black devils are deft enough to unlace a pair of high-topped shoes. Unpapered aliens circumvent the shortgrass country, believing we are bad luck going back from the way the Border Patrol used to keep us under vigil. Coons have grown so fat and careless of habit since the fur markets ended that about all they deface or destroy is at ground level. Red-caps are nimble-fingered fellows from squeezing triggers, lifting bottle openers and twisting corkscrews; but the ones around the ranch have been careful to close gates, especially ones tied open to pen livestock.

The advent of low birthweight bulls brought a big improvement to calving heifers. Be better, as I have written before, if cows laid eggs. Robert Petty, a prominent black oxen raiser up at Nolan, Texas, has added a bloodline named "Sleep Easy" to his herd. His catalogue does not say whether the man or the beast sleeps easier.

Among we better manipulators of obstetric chains and chrome calf pullers, a question continues whether to breed toward heavy sleeping or light sleeping cattle. Until I dropped checking my heifers twice a night, awakening the cattle caused more births in darkness. For a solution, I

stopped keeping the heifer calves from the first-calf heifers. I also added a bloodline named "Cloudburst," a bull famous for rapid presentation of a calf. The first calving season, I'd hardly have time to awaken before the calf was on the ground.

The gates are wired closed. The moon changes next week. Might be a good idea to cull the cows that don't bed down early. A cross between "Sleep Easy" and "Cloudburst" might be the solution to spending less time in the darkness checking heifers and keeping me safe in bed on the early Sunday morning shift.